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ABSTRACT

This study examined the backgrounds of Navajo college graduates in order to identify factors contributing to Native Americans' academic motivation. A questionnaire mailed to 200 randomly selected Navajo college graduates investigated family characteristics, educational experience, socioeconomic status, language use, and demographic data. Among the respondents were 80 women and 27 men with a mean age of 33; 87% had been born on the reservation. Most respondents came from families that spoke Navajo at home and practiced the Navajo Way. More than half the parents completed less than 6 years of schooling, and most annual family incomes were less than $10,000. About half of respondents spoke no English at school entry, and most attended schools that taught primarily in English. Respondents indicated that their own motivation and encouragement from family were the most important factors contributing to their high educational attainment. About half said that a teacher had encouraged them to succeed in school. The paper contends that Native Americans and other minority groups have aspired to high academic achievement but have not until recently had the opportunity to act on those aspirations. Whereas other studies have correlated achievement and socioeconomic status, the present study suggests that a stable family life with traditional values may be a more important influence in the achievement of Navajo students. This study contains 19 references. (SV)

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Factors Affecting Achievement Motivation and Academic Achievement of Native American Students

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Abstract

A questionnaire was mailed to two hundred randomly selected Navajos who had attained at least a four year college degree. Of the questionnaires mailed, 107 were returned. The questionnaire consisted of questions relating to family characteristics, educational background, socioeconomic status, language information and demographic data.

The results indicate that most of the respondents had parents who were born on the reservation, spoke primarily Navajo, considered their families to be mainly traditional (practicing the Navajo Way), and had income levels ranging from $1,000 to $10,000. Their own motivation and encouragement from family were given as the most important factors contributing to their high educational attainment.

Introduction

Although family structure and family socialization practices appear to be important determinants of achievement motivation and educational attainment (Hermans, 1972; Kelly, 1972; Rosen, 1961; Touliatos & Lindholm, 1974), there has been very little effort to examine these factors from a culturally different perspective, and more specifically from a Native American perspective. Maehr (1974) states that "the possibility that achievement may take a variety of forms and be pursued to differing ends has really not been fully explored" (p.887). The majority of cross-cultural work on achievement motivation has focused on the universality or unidimensional concept of the achievement motive (Berry, 1981) and little attention has been directed to the notion that it (achievement motive) may be expressed differently in other societies and cultures. Only very recently has the notion of defining achievement motivation and other psychological theories from a culturally based perspective (rather than on Western theoretical models) been pursued (Baumrind, 1980; Korchin, 1980; & Cole, 1975). Maehr and Nicholls (1980) suggest that success or failure appear to be distinct concepts which are culturally and situationally determined. Despite these beliefs, there is a scarcity of information concerning factors that contribute to the success or

failure of Native Americans and other minority groups in academic settings.

The literature on Native Americans indicates that Indian students experience a high drop-out rate in college (Falk & Aitkens, 1984; Edwards & Smith, 1981), and achieve grades consistently lower than white students (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1986). In most instances, the literature does not attempt to explicate the causes or factors that contribute to this problem. To find solutions to these problems, research on Native Americans must focus on the Native American experience. Duda (1980) suggests that extensive cross-cultural ethnographic data are needed to address concepts such as achievement motivation and high academic achievement among Native Americans. One way to meet this challenge is to explore and identify those factors that contribute to the successful completion of a college degree.

This study examined the backgrounds of Navajo individuals who had completed at least a four-year college degree to attempt to identify those characteristics that were "most influential" in their pursuit of a college degree. It is postulated that identification of these factors can lead to the development of a more appropriate model to measure achievement motivation and academic achievement from a Native American perspective.

Methods and Procedures

The population for this study consisted of approximately 400 Navajos who had attained at least a four year college degree. The participants were identified from 1983-1986 graduate rosters from the Navajo Division of Higher Education in Window Rock, Arizona. The researcher gained entry through the Education Committee (composed of Navajos who are elected at large from the Navajo Reservation) of the Navajo Division of Education, who endorsed her study.

The sample consisted of 200 participants who were randomly selected from the population. These participants were mailed an interview with questions relating to family characteristics, educational background, socioeconomic status, language background, and demographic data. A second mail-out to the same sample was conducted two months after the first, to ensure a representative sample.

The interview schedule was developed with the assistance of Navajo educators who live on the reservation and work for Navajo educational agencies.

Results

One hundred seven of the 200 questionnaires mailed out were returned which constitutes a 50 percent response rate. Of the 107 respondents, 11 had completed a bachelor's degree, 78 a master's degree, four a doctorate degree, and 14 listed other

degrees such as jurisprudence or medical. There were 80 females and 27 males in the sample. Their ages ranged from 23 to 53, with a mean age of 33. Eighty-seven percent of those responding had been born on the reservation.

The respondents were asked a series of questions concerning their family's background. Table 1 shows the most frequent responses to these questions. The majority of the respondents

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Insert Table 1 about here

(80% or higher) indicated that their parents were born on the reservation and were married. Sixty-six percent reported family incomes below $10,000 with 49 percent reporting family incomes of $5,999 or less. In this question the respondent was asked to list total income to include income earned from rug weaving, jewelry making and other crafts. Fifty percent of the participants responded that they came from traditional families where Navajo was the predominant language and the Navajo way was followed by family members. A question on religious practice (not included in table) yielded similar results with 48% responding that the family's religious practice was traditional. The most frequently listed occupation for father was "laborer," and "housewife" for mother. Fifty-five percent reported that their fathers had completed less than 6 years of

Table 1

Family Characteristics

Characteristics	Percent Responding
1. Father born on reservation	84%
2. Mother born on reservation	93%
3. Parents marital status	
Married	83%
Divorced or Separated	11%
Single	03%
4. Total income level of family	
Under $1,000	19%
$1,000 - $5,999	30%
$6,000 - $9,999	17%
$10,000 and over	30%
5. Family orientation	
Traditional (predominately Navajo speaking and practicing the Navajo Way)	50%
Modern (partially acculturated)	36%
Modern (totally acculturated)	13%
6. Father's occupation	
Laborer	62%
Educator	2%

(table continued)

Characteristics	Percent Responding
Chapter and council official	5%
Engineer	5%
Supervisor	9%
7. Mother's occupation	
Housewife	47%
Rug weaver	14%
Cook	9%
Teacher	6%
Nurse Aide	5%
8. Years of school completed by father	
0 - 6	55%
6 - 12	24%
Some college or college graduate	10%
Other	9%
9. Years of school completed by mother	
0 - 6	52%
6 - 12	33%
Some college or college graduate	9%
Other	4%

schooling, and 52% stated that their mothers had completed less than six years of schooling. However, over 60% of the respondents indicated that their parents were interested in more education (question not included in table). Ten percent indicated that their fathers were college graduates or had attended some college and nine percent indicated that their mothers were college graduates or had attended some college.

The educational attainment and occupations of the parents may explain the low family incomes reported. While research studies indicate that socioeconomic status (occupation and educational level) is correlated with achievement motivation and academic achievement (Evans & Anderson, 1976; Turner, 1970), these data indicate that SES did not appear to be an important factor in the educational attainment of this Navajo population. It may be that for Navajo families a stable family life with traditional values becomes a more important determinant of achievement.

Table 2 shows the responses related to the educational background of the students. The majority of the sample (71%)

Insert Table 2 about here

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had no preschool or kindergarten experience prior to entering first grade. Forty-eight percent were monolingual Navajo speakers. Studies on bilingual education suggest that children

Table 2

Educational Background

Question	Percent Yes	No	Some
1. Preschool or kindergarten?	28%	71%	--
2. Speak/understand English upon school entry?	33%	48%	17%
3. Teacher use of native language?	9%	89%	--
4. Type of school attended?			
Public	71%	29%	
BIA	47%	53%	
Mission	15%	85%	
5. Teacher encourage school success?	53%	13%	33%
6. Participation in extra-curricular activities?			
Athletics	56%	44%	--
Music, art	51%	49%	--
Social clubs	52%	48%	--
Publications (school news)	27%	73%	--
Debate, drama	14%	86%	--

who speak little or no English experience the most difficulty with instruction in school and that one of the factors that facilitates the transition to an English-speaking world of learning is a bilingual teacher. For this population, only nine percent report that their teacher used Navajo in the classroom, which indicates that instruction was conducted primarily in English. Seventy-one percent report that they attended public schools, and 47 percent attended BIA. Apparently neither type of school favored bilingual education at the time these individuals were attending elementary and secondary school. However, 53 percent indicate that their teacher encouraged them to succeed in school which may have influenced their achievement levels.

The responses to participation in extra-curricular activities indicate that about half of the population participated in athletics, music, art and social clubs, but participation in publications, debate and drama was less than one-third of the population.

Participants were asked several questions regarding the language usage of their parents as well as themselves. Table 3 indicates the language patterns of these respondents in the home environment and with friends. Seventy-nine percent stated that

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Insert Table 3 about here

Table 3

Language Background

Question	Navajo	English	Both
1. Language spoken by parents	79%	11%	9%
2. Language used by parents with respondent	58%	24%	16%
3. Language used by respondent with parents	54%	34%	11%
4. Language used by respondent with friends	9%	48%	42%
5. In which language do you communicate best orally?			
On the job	3%	83%	13%
Socially	13%	63%	23%
6. In which language do you communicate best written?			
On the job	1%	98%	-
Socially	3%	96%	-

their parents spoke Navajo to each other, but only 58 percent stated that their parents used Navajo when speaking to them, and 54 percent reported that they used Navajo when speaking to their parents. However, most of the respondents used English or both Navajo and English when speaking to friends. Only ten percent stated they spoke Navajo with friends. To the question "In what language do you think you can communicate best," the majority responded that in both oral and written communication they felt more competent in English. It is interesting to note that they felt a greater English competence in the written than the oral communication. This population, whose first language is Navajo, may consider itself more competent in written English communication because the written mode provides a greater opportunity to monitor and correct.

The five questions in Table 4 concerned the respondents behavior toward school and school work. These questions

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Insert Table 4 about here

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attempted to tap their perceptions concerning motivation toward excelling since there is an overwhelming amount of literature indicating that minority students underachieve because of "lack of motivation" and "having no desire to excel" (Bryde, 1971; Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1966). Sixty-eight percent stated that

Table 4

Motivation Questions

Question	Yes	No	Sometimes
1. While in school did you desire to achieve academically?	68%	9%	17%
2. Did you do the school work assigned?	82%	0%	13%
3. Did you read in your free time?	56%	9%	29%
4. Did you compete (academically) against your friends or relatives while in school?	56%	40%	0%
5. Did you compete (socially) against your friends or relatives while in school?	38%	58%	0%

they desired to achieve academically, 82 percent responded they completed school work assigned, 56 percent said they read in their free time, and 56 percent said that they competed (academically) against friends and relatives. All five factors have been identified in the research as contributing to school success.

The last question (not listed) asked respondents to list the single factor that contributed to their high academic achievement. Thirty-four percent responded that it was their own motivation, and 45 percent reported that it was encouragement from parents and other family members. Some of the statements made by the participants in response to this question were:

> My parents always encouraged us to finish school, set our goals high.
>
> Stable family home, and unquestioned familial support (not financial) emotionally.
>
> I wanted it - the value of education was instilled in me at an early age.
>
> My parents encouraged my siblings and me to obtain the best education, for the benefit of ourselves.
>
> Self-determination and tremendous encouragement from my father which built my self-determination.
>
> My mother's encouragement and support. She was the first in her family to go to school and learn English well.

Positive role models from parents - education and discipline were priorities.

Discussion

This study examined the background of Navajo college graduates in an attempt to identify the factors that may have contributed to their high educational attainment. It is apparent that the parents of this sample were able to motivate and encourage their children to succeed. Therefore, the assumption that low-income and low educational level of parents perpetuate low educational aspirations for their children does not hold true. In this sample of Navajo college graduates, we see that parents and family members were the driving force in their desire to achieve.

The majority of these Navajo college graduates came from homes whose family income levels were very low (53 percent below $5,999), the family was traditional and spoke predominantly Navajo, and the father's occupation was that of laborer. Over 50 percent of the parents had less than six years of schooling. Over half of the parents were interested in more education for themselves, but were unable to obtain it.

Despite these statistics, this sample of Navajos was able to successfully complete a four-year college degree and in most cases exceed it. One can only speculate as to what motivated them to achieve when all the odds appear to be against them.

This author contends that achievement motivation and aspirations toward high academic achievement have been prevalent factors among Native Americans and other minority groups. However, it has only been within the recent past that these groups have been afforded the opportunity to express these motives via education.

The question of what motivates Navajos to achieve appears to be linked to the family as revealed by this sample's response to "the single factor that contributed to their high academic achievement." In a similar study, Amodeo and Martin (1982) found that Hispanics also felt that encouragement from family was the most motivating factor influencing their high educational achievement.

These findings indicate that the family (as measured through the stability of traditional values) is the key to the academic success of these high achieving Navajos.

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